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What is culture?

In: Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Rituals and Socio-Cosmic Order in Eastern Indonesian Societies; Part II Maluku 146 (1990), no: 1, Leiden, 147-168

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WHAT IS CULTURE?


1. Introduction

*Lions of the Punjab* ostensibly analyses a question of considerable topical relevance: the growth of Sikhism, and especially its particular and problematic history during the course of colonial rule. What is unusual is the author’s attempt to demonstrate that ‘culture’ – in this case, the particular complex of cultural phenomena associated with Sikhism – has undergone considerable, diverse and rapid change during the relatively short historical period selected for his study. The book sets out to describe these developments, to explain them in terms of a novel interpretation of the larger societal context, and throughout the text to posit this study of a single local case as a dialogue concerned with the nature and making of culture itself; a most admirably conceived project operating on different levels and which is reflected in the complex and original organizational procedure whereby different facets of his argument are unfolded.

Before entering the controversy about culture (Section 3 below) and the problems of method thrown up by the book (both Sections 2 and 3), a few words must be devoted to the particular case study through which Fox works out his ideas. Apart from these initial introductory remarks, I shall allow the detail of Fox’s exposition to unfold in the course of my argument.

The basic enigma for scholarship, and one which continues to divide it today into virtually irreconcilable and poorly communicating compartments, is that of comparability. Accumulating traditions within the social disciplines – especially explicit in anthropology – foster the idea that ‘cultures’ are each unique and resistant to comparison, and thus, by implication, the social and religious movements through which ‘culture’ ostensibly surfaces from its ordinary anonymity. Hence the task of the scholar seems to be that of description from ‘within’, as it were, and thus of locating the skills required to gain access to that other culture or movement – to ‘translate’ it into terms accessible to specialists of other ‘cultures’. That this problem – the apparent uniqueness of each and every society/culture – is closely connected with inexplicit assumptions concerning the given units of reference and discourse (the supposed unity, singularity and sufficiency of the categories called ‘societies’ or ‘cultures’) is coming to be a dominant theme among critics, but it must nevertheless be emphasized that the opposing comparative tradition hardly differs in these
same basic assumptions concerning the primary units of discourse and reference. In this respect, the contextualist approach, such as that attempted in the present book, marks a radical break with such tradition and one with which the present author is entirely in sympathy.

While Fox engages in a critique of what he calls 'the traditional culture concept', he also attempts to re-explain culture through exploration of the broad contexts in which, as he sees it, cultural phenomena take form, so that much of the book's volume is taken up with questions which traditionally have seemed either background or irrelevant. Fox unfolds different aspects of the contexts in which Sikhism developed in the early twentieth century and seeks to demonstrate the connections which link them with the particular cultural dispositions that make up the empirical detail of the movement and with a view of culture which stresses its flexibility, dynamism and openness within these contexts - a position and method considerably and creditably at odds with classical approaches and assumptions.

Sikhism is one of a score of modern popular movements which possess much of the character of civil wars: they not only pit social groups against the forces of the state but against other social and sectarian groups. The conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese closely parallels those in Punjab, Assam, Lebanon, Northern Ireland and Belgium, in that attempts to gain security through statehood take on the form of violent drives to separate previously mixed population clusters, to drive Muslims out of East Beirut and Christians out of the west of the city, to separate Catholics and Protestants into different ghettos of Belfast, and in Sri Lanka to drive Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese each into their own territorial enclaves. Thus, the call for a Khalistan turns from an unbelievable fantasy of

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1 Roxborough 1979: Ch. 4; Bourdieu 1981; Wolf 1982: Introduction; Gould 1981; Bauman's superb 'Culture as concept' (in his book of 1973); and Perlin 1983, are examples of the broad range of approaches to the unit problem. For a radical contextualist the problem lies in an absence from description / analysis of the vertical and horizontal complexes of contextual forces and structures which take form in the long course of history simultaneously with those 'local'/regional' features which most naturally engage our attentions and which seem to precede those contexts. What should be sought, then, is the displacement of the two-dimensional atomistic view of a world of separate, bounded entities ('societies', 'cultures') by multi-dimensional perspectives in which all 'difference', at whatever level and on whatever scale, would be seen to be part and parcel of these complex contexts and products of history rather than archaeologies of distant pasts and closures. In short, the unit problem consists of an absence of essential components for an explanation, of limited frameworks and of epistemological grounds that seem to write off the need for such frameworks. From such perspectives, and despite the different interpretive uses to which they are put, the units of discourse of a Godelier, a Sahlins, a Geertz, a Taylor, would be seen to be of the same kind.

2 There is a wealth of new literature which shares these concerns and changes, a case in point being the exciting new work, both historical and sociological, on Africa: see, for example, Ranger 1982 and 1983 (esp. the remark on p. 262); Chanock 1985; and Papstein 1985.
expatriate Sikhs in the urban fastnesses of Toronto and Vancouver into a self-fulfilling steamroller in rural Punjab. Cultural nationalism is one of the driving forces affecting many regions in the late 20th century – not, then, survivals of a more or less distant past destined to disentangle with increased social and cultural homogenization but part and parcel of the curious dialectic of internationalization itself.  

Fox’s task is partly to demonstrate that behind the external face of the movement presented in the popular media and assumed from outside lies a complex, highly differentiated history, a movement which, it is discovered, comprises several movements in occasional conflict with one another and in occasional conflict with the state or with social groups and other movements among the broader population of the region. Necessarily, then, it has been weakly defined in terms of population (its membership) and territory, while the frontiers between Hindu and Sikh, and Sikhism and Hinduism, have been so unclear that they may even separate brothers of the same family. Punjab is a region in which what today are distinguished as Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs (but these distinctions are unstable products of diverse historical forces) have inhabited the same towns and villages until modern conflicts have successively acted to drive them apart. In fact, these boundaries have shifted quite radically in the course of the long history of the movement since its emergence in the 16th century as a reformist, socially-radical and puritanical rejection of Hindu religio-social orthodoxy. However, it is in the course of the rapid evolution of the present phase of the ‘Sikh question’ that the socio-religious boundaries of Sikhism have paradoxically become more rigidly defined and reinforced along traditional ‘culturalist’ and ‘ethnicist’ lines, thereby creating the very units which now form the a-priori bases of perception and discussion, but which represent the dissolution of once eclectic, even cosmopolitan, cultural milieux. In so doing, perception has become distorted respecting the origins and nature of the problem: results of history appear in the guise of survivals from a pre-Enlightenment past, while past conditions now appear as distant hopes or predictions for an Enlightened future.

As described, Sikhism would seem to be highly atypical of the experience of anthropologists concerned with Nuer or Asante, or ‘native’ Australians or Americans, or with the kind of complex population cluster characteristically selected for treatment in one of the many post-war studies of Indian villages. And yet recent scholarship has begun to pull apart many of the assumptions which have allowed us to assume the unity and separateness of the particular cases chosen by field workers for study: the African ‘tribe’ and Indian village no longer appear to be the survivals of a distant, more ‘pure’ or coherent past assumed at the time of observation

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3 Analogous observations occur in many different fields today, for example, in Mathias’s considerations on growth of a world economy (1987) and in the kinds of case referred to in n. 9 (thus state formation, village corporations and attendant ideologies).
to have been subject to the dissolving acids of modernity – the ubiquitous explanation for any dissonance observed between its parts. Both the units involved and their histories have become matters of historical and contextual investigation and dispute in their own right, and in this respect Fox’s choice of a case from which to generate an argument about culture turns out to be entirely reasonable and even apposite.

Fox’s choice of the period of colonial rule for the main body of his study is equally apposite, since many of the features mentioned above can be clearly demonstrated. New radical tendencies arose which were at odds with more mainstream accommodations with Hindu religion and colonial rule, and it is in this period, in Fox’s opinion, that important aspects of the socio-economic profile of the modern Punjab took their shape. Indeed, in one of the succession of prefaces by means of which he has attempted to keep his book abreast of the rapid course of events affecting the Sikh question, he remarks on how these confirm his interpretations and demonstrate the redundancy of the ‘traditional culture concept’ (xiv-xv). He sets out, therefore, to describe the principal socio-ecological sub-regions of the territory and the manner in which colonial administration shaped their future. He is at special pains to distinguish the tenurial conditions and economic trajectory of the peasantries of these regions (arguments amply illustrated with numerous tables and maps). These developments are, in turn, contextualized within the general international frameworks of colonial occupation and economy, and Fox makes a particular use of ‘dependency’ theory (development/underdevelopment polarities arising in the course of the expansion of capitalism). He sees the colonial authorities as having become caught up in a web of contradictory policies, exploitative and manipulative: on the one hand, purposely fostering the more militant aspects of Sikh identity as the Sikh came to be chosen as a backbone of the colonial Indian army, while, on the other hand, their economic policies undermined the very capacity of the peasant farm to manage its own economy and stabilize a reasonable standard of living. From these contexts, Fox turns to more cultural questions, and especially to how particular colonial concerns and 19th-century beliefs among the colonizers fostered social divisions and types of perception which subsequently developed a powerful momentum of their own and have saddled independent India with the accumulating fruits of sectarian violence. It is within this matrix that the description of various aspects of Sikhism occurs, especially of the radical turns, risings and conflicts, social and religious, which punctuated early 20th-century Punjab.

The time period seems apposite, as does also the explanatory sequence. As initially remarked, I find the procedure admirable, but in lieu of suf-

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4 Usefully captured by de Josselin de Jong’s attack on the place of the ‘normative past’ in interpretations of the present (Introductory speech to the Lewis Henry Morgan Symposium on Structural Change, Leiden University, 1983).
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icient justification (methodological argumentation) - and this is my first
criticism - it remains arbitrary: a unit like any unit imposing its own sense
of reasonableness upon the material, seemingly sufficient as a framework
for explanation until another writer chooses a different framework no less
convincing or points out important difficulties with Fox’s particular choice.
Thus, Dipankar Gupta looks for the roots of the present Sikh conflict in
very recent post-independence history; he is quite correct to point to the
manner in which recent governments (those of the 1970s and early ’80s)
have fostered the more extreme and religious elements among Sikh rad-
cicals and created a false image for popular consumption which obscures
genuinely economic and political issues (Gupta 1985). Kapur, on the other
hand, draws similar conclusions to Fox about Sikh identity and history
from a much narrower, more political and Punjab-centred framework of
attention (Kapur 1985).

If I must choose, I prefer Fox’s wider, more international and interdis-
ciplinary framework, and I also prefer his long time-sequence, but its
rationale is neither explicit nor, given present conflicts and antipathies
affecting both historical and anthropological studies, obvious. To take
merely one example of the kind of problem arising from decisions about
an appropriate time-frame, Bayly (1986) argues that peasant soldiers,
recruited by Sikh rulers in the early 19th century, came from the same
villages of the Central Punjab as those who participated a century later in
the Third Sikh War, upon which Fox chooses to concentrate much of his
fire. If this is so, then more long-standing conditions than Fox considers
– an even longer historical perspective – may be in question in so far as
the socio-economic roots of current Sikhism are concerned and also as
concerns its invented traditions and other cultural features – the central
and ultimate concern of Fox’s book (the importance of this point will
emerge later in the review).

What is more, his focus on the colonial period – the neglect of longer
time-frames – coincides with traditional social-science assumptions about
pre-colonial conditions and the ‘civilizing’ burdens of colonial occupation.
Colonialism has seemed to represent that set of universal forces that brings
capitalism, and much else (reason, Enlightenment, progress, scepticism,
markets, money, romantic love), and Fox’s focus on this period conforms
with his own tendency to trade in some of the increasingly-less-acceptable
social-science assumptions about the nature of ‘traditional societies’ be-
fore colonial times.5 In this perspective, his unstated reasons for choosing

5 The unargued use of the umbrella term ‘pre-capitalist’ to describe Punjab’s 19th-century
agrarian system (e.g., pp. 18, 20) conforms with a unilinear evolutionism which makes
knowledge of pre-colonial conditions unnecessary since assuming that colonial rule led
to the monetization and commercialization of India. See also his phrase ‘evolving towards
[class] consciousness’ (Section 3 below) and his particular approach to dependency theory
(Section 2). In fact there are grounds for arguing for processes of demonetization and
ruralization in the early colonial period.
this time-frame are highly controversial: the weak significance given to history before colonialism, the apparent absence of significant features in pre-colonial society itself, a hidden universalism lurking within the innocent and creditable attentions given to the violences of colonial occupation.

Despite these qualifications, Fox has selected a framework sufficiently long to avoid the equally serious traps laid by the more temporary impacts of short-run changes and dramatic events upon observation, and he has also sought to unpack the broadest range of contexts concerning the events in hand. No matter what criticism is brought to bear on his attempts to put these frames into discursive practice, he has shown the way towards the kind of breadth and longevity increasingly recognized as required for even anthropological studies of present-day peoples. In particular, and returning to the problems of ‘culture’ with which I began, such frameworks may be seen to be essential in order to break out of those epistemological strait-jackets which have confined treatments of culture to the same conceptual formats as earlier treatments of ‘races’ and ‘human types’.

2. Contexts
In spite of this praise for strategy and initial conception, the body of the study – taken together with the quality of the argument – constitutes a considerable disappointment. Even given the strong claims made by the author this would not in itself be surprising given the nature of the task. The sense of unrealized purposes is endemic to attempts to rethink the culture question – Fox’s critical treatment of some of his predecessors simply expresses what is generally agreed among those concerned, even among the participants themselves. Nonetheless, the destructive side to the attack upon conventional thinking remains thoroughly worthwhile, not merely for the obvious platitude that wide-ranging criticism is a condition of vitality in the field, but, in the present instance, because of the considerable refinement and volume of varied criticism accumulating around the ways in which different disciplines have traditionally handled the question. It would be a mistake to reject this criticism simply because no satisfactory new models have been proposed that convincingly displace current categories and logic. While results seem meagre, even negative, when questions are asked about what the critics have substituted for the positions they attack, these appearances should not be allowed to induce complacency: the real situation needs to be looked at more carefully. In fact, the diverse movements of critique have achieved a remarkable, if piecemeal momentum both within the anthropological establishment7 and beyond, say in history, literary studies and philosophy, as well as in fields of study less easy

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6 See also George Stocking 1968:229, and Tzvetan Todorov 1986:174, for continuities between the epistemology of race and that of the notion of the ‘multiplicity’ of cultures.

7 See Bourdieu 1981 for an excellent characterization of what I mean by ‘establishment’, and of the ‘fields of force’ in which the petit cultures of our different disciplines and fields take form and are sustained.
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to classify (such as Bourdieu’s and de Certeau’s ‘anthropologies of knowledge’ or Stocking’s historical studies of anthropology). The very absence of general order and synthesis, the self-contradictory nature of the more ambitious attempts to generate new theories of culture, and the equally contradictory character, yet abundance, of more modest and specific attacks on concepts and methods, confirm an increasing loss of conviction in what were once agreed frameworks of approach and discussion within which reasonable argument was seen to take place (assumptions about the content and proper limits of the field, what constitutes an adequate methodology, and so forth).8

Moreover, if the results seem merely negative, this is surely an illusion: effective criticism surely begins when new dispositions of the evidence start to overflow and contradict the inherited categories, a necessarily piecemeal process affecting fragmentary aspects of the fields of study and various levels of critical intention among scholars. Examples would be the accumulating literatures on the ‘invention of tradition’ or against use of the term ‘tribe’, Southall’s ‘Nuer and Dinka are people’, Lévi-Strauss’s attack on the concept of ‘archaism’ and his discussion of totemism, the sceptical remarks by Sperber about the conventional handling of the concept of belief, Kloos’s criticism of ahistorical conceptions of ritual – thus a disordered corpus of points at different levels with different intentions, but undermining what had once seemed an invulnerable fortress (one in which debate and new interpretation were possible but operating within what now appear as closely circumscribed limits).9 All of these points and occasions of criticism serve to open out primarily ‘closed’ problem domains, to broaden frameworks of interpretation, and even, by implication, to reverse, or otherwise alter, the logical ordering of certain of the universally accepted dogma of the medium (for example, this seems to be the unavoidable implication of the ‘invention of tradition’ literature with respect to classical unilinear evolution and its applications).10 Part of the problem of turning this spontaneous and dispersed undergrowth of criticism into new general models lies in the continued compartmentalization of the disciplines and thus in the astonishing lack of awareness – even among those who think that major change is required – of the abundance of critical work accumulating on the other sides of the categories within which we ordinarily work. A huge task of new synthesis and a

8 An example of such self-contradiction is Sahlins’ continued correlation of societal types with evolutionary stages within a format in which systematic culture loss, due to recent historical events, also occupies an important part of his argument (Sahlins 1972:ch.1, ‘The original affluent society’).

9 Kloos 1987; Lévi-Strauss 1963 & 1964; Southall 1976 (and see also Daniels 1987); Sperber 1982.

10 The essays in Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, are simply explicit examples of a wide range of critical work possessing similar implications (say, Steward’s treatment of Plains Indians, 1955, or the increasing consensus concerning the recent origins of village sharehold communities (e.g. Blum 1971; Breman 1982; Miller 1926).
much greater volume of debate and criticism of the foundations of our
thinking will be required before attempts at reconstruction cease to be
disappointing.\textsuperscript{11}

This said, Fox is perfectly correct in his disenchantment with attempts
at new general theory: it is remarkable for stepping back into the security
of the very thought it initially took exception to and which it had so
effectively criticized. For example, Maurice Godelier's view (1978) that
thought and belief are as material as ploughs and labour relations, and
ought therefore to be considered part of the 'forces of production', since
they act upon production, is an arresting reversal of dominant culturalist
views concerning the consistency of social form and belief (as in Dumont's
view of caste or some medievalists' views of the role of the 'three orders'
in medieval society\textsuperscript{12}), and it is also an attractive answer to the crudities
of certain versions of the base/superstructure model of so-called 'vulgar
Marxism'.\textsuperscript{13} But, looked at closely, examining its frameworks and what it
connects, one is left wondering how this statement differs - apart from its
Marxist terminology - from the old Fichtean idealist circle of the identity
of subject and object, the treadmill upon which both opponents and de-
fendants continue to turn when attempting to explain relationships be-
tween mental and material constructs (thus, among modernists, from
Dumont, at one extreme, through Sahlins, to Godelier).\textsuperscript{14} Maurice Bloch's
critical comment that Godelier provides no space for dissent in his model
of the 'réel' accurately puts the finger on the epistemological identity
between, on the one hand, his own cultural holism and narrow concept of
what constitutes culture, and, on the other, the basic logical forms of the
ideas which he is criticizing (Bloch 1978:768). In this sense, Marxist and
non-Marxist anthropologies seem at one in their inabilities to attend to
fundamental questions about social change and structure, being asked
from outside, and concerning individual (not group) difference, agency,
scepticism, belief, and that awkward umbrella term 'history'. For example,
it can be argued that a substantial aspect of the popularity of Bourdieu's

\textsuperscript{11} Such compartmentalization - and the dubious function of the 'normative past' (n.4) - is
well illustrated by the apparent failure to absorb into the basic corpus of anthropological
ideas about the present, the growing literatures on internal markets, local money-use and
commodity production in, say, 17th/18th-century West Africa, India & China, and on
processes of world economic integration during the same period. Another characteristic
example would be the contrast between Haller's 'outsider' view of the uses of physical
anthropology in the 19th century (Haller 1971) and Shapiro's characteristic 'insider'
exercise in self-congratulation concerning the same discipline (Shapiro 1959).

\textsuperscript{12} Dumont 1980 (on which see Appadurai 1986); Mousnier, e.g. 1971 (on which see Gately,
Moote & Wills 1971); Herlihy 1973; thus Ernst Bloch's remark (1986:99) concerning
Bachofen.

\textsuperscript{13} Yet this 'vulgar' base/superstructure model is neither seriously argued today nor can it be
equated with the central Marxist tradition (see, for example, Cohen 1978, ch. viii).

\textsuperscript{14} Source of the notorious pessimism of the Frankfurt School, from Horkheimer and Adorno's
Dialectic of the Enlightenment to Marcuse's One dimensional man; see the excellent essay
by Seyla Benhabib, 1981, which treats this 'identity' logic from Weber to Habermas.
Outline of a theory of practice is not least an unwitting recognition of familiar ideas in unfamiliar dress: his notion of ‘doxa’ seems identical to the holistic cultural substantivism which has long imprisoned thought about other peoples’ culture and to lie at the basis of beliefs in cultural relativism. The same is surely true of the enthusiastic reception given to the ideas of Karl Polanyi, while similar criticism could be made of Maurice Bloch himself and also of Raymond Williams (1977), among many others. The creditable wish to give a sufficiently active role to culture seems merely to blunt the most creative aspects of Marxism’s potential offering to the social disciplines. What constitutes ‘culture’, where it begins and ends, its relationship, therefore, to what we call ‘society’ – thus the question of what sorts of unity are implied by use of these terms – remains as obscure as ever and thus still vulnerable to ostensibly discredited culturalist formulae. Arguably, then, a contextualizing and historical approach constitutes an essential instrument for breaking up these hidden circles of agreement, replacing arguments based in logic and common sense by more open and diverse dispositions towards evidence.

In short, the sense of disappointment with Fox’s book arises not because he has been unable to come up with a convincing new theorization of the nature of cultural phenomena. At the least, Fox’s stated opinions about the flexibility and openness of culture and its continuity with a whole succession of contexts operating on a sometimes international scale, his belief in its essentially modern roots, and the need to restore the notion of agency to treatments of cultural activities and forms, are views which are widely held by increasingly substantial numbers of scholars, even though not as yet translated into the search for an adequate strategy of method and approach which would allow these conceptions to be properly transformed into a different kind of knowledge, thus into genuinely new kinds of data, data-organization, methodologies and theories.

Instead, the objection to Fox’s text lies in the large gap separating his admirable plan from the manner of its execution: even when articulating positions with which the reader might be expected to be sympathetic, the argument is generally less than convincing and even likely to induce scepticism. It simply does not measure up to the standards of his critical predecessors, in spite of the decisive superiority of a framework including history and context – a judgement particularly regrettable, given the complacent conservatism which dominates much of the Indianist/Orien-
talist establishment, in which substantial criticism of its habits of thought is rarely heard or tolerated.

The problems concern Fox’s descriptions of those empirical features of the Sikh movement considered significant for the task of presenting cultural data, his attempt to demonstrate the broad contexts of Punjabi history in which Sikh culture is thought to have taken form, and in his theoretical treatment of culture itself. I shall deal with each of these questions in turn.

Sikhism, as Fox shows and as has been pointed out above, can be shown to have consisted of diverse and conflicting strands, its interaction with colonial government involving a complex relationship which led its more radical wings to gain influence, narrow the focus of the movement and assume the militant, ever more non-Hindu and then anti-Hindu stance which today is too easily mistaken for Sikhism as such – as its past, its consistency and shape, and thus as the representative position of all those who regard themselves as Sikh. In short, today’s militant Sikhism tends popularly to be assumed as a single coherent body of beliefs and practices inherited, as such, from earlier times and in conflict with the needs of the modern state – a conformity of popular opinion (with its tendency to cast all Sikhs as figures of the type) and kinds of academic approach which Fox rightly subjects to criticism (esp. Ch. 10). The provocative title of the book – *Lions of the Punjab* – is not merely intended as an expression of the self-image of the Sikh (the characteristic Sikh name, Singh, means ‘lion’) but to portray sources from which critical elements of this radical militancy derived: that image was conjured up, both wittingly and unwittingly, by the colonial rulers and foisted upon a peasant population increasingly regarded as the demographic reservoir of the British colonial army. But this image of the fierce but loyal peasant ‘tribe’ or ‘caste’ (a significant combination of terms interestingly at odds with current usages) in turn became internalized by this same population as a popular military ethic with attached rituals of recruitment and a detailed and precise imagery. It included the accumulation of ‘traditions’ of service and views of the past which influenced attitudes towards the world beyond, thus ‘a culture in the making’, as Fox’s equally provocative subtitle claims (see esp. Ch. 8). In short, in Fox’s view, modern Sikhism was constituted partly in response to prevailing military policies and practices as they evolved in the course of colonial rule. In turn, colonial agrarian policy was in part tempered and forged with this human resource in mind.

However, despite this aura of manipulation and control, these developments assumed an increasingly complex and independent momentum of their own: the more militants aspects led in the course of time to increasingly conflictual relationships with the British ‘raj’. In part, then, these images and changes were developed and manipulated by colonial officials, but they were also a less witting product of the complex and diverse economic history of colonial policies towards the lands and peasants of the Punjab. Here, Fox considers the influence of the world market upon the
diverse regions of the province, namely the manner in which colonial policy brought it to bear upon peasant and townsman. He argues that through a series of changing and self-contradictory policies the colonial government both repressed and encouraged the local development of capitalism (Chs 2-4). In short, these policies progressively stimulated a rising tide of popular resentment, which provided the powerful rank-and-file following behind the ‘Sikh Wars’ against colonial power. As already remarked, the early chapters detail the differing ecology, settlement processes and agrarian and social character of contrasting sub-regions, and it is in terms of this history that Fox described the eruption of the different movements composing Sikh-cum-Hindu political and communal reaction in these years (Chs 5, 6 & 9).

As mentioned, these contextual and theoretical issues also entail a search for the origins of the now commonplace ‘Sikh’ profile: the ‘lion’ or Singh with his turban and sword and an appropriate code of behaviour and ritual. Thus it also entails consideration (but unfortunately not an investigation) of British conceptions of race and ethnicity – those ‘unwitting’ aspects of the metropolitan ‘culture’ which gave formal structure to the more witting manipulations by the colonial rulers of a Sikh military identity (pp. 3-4 & Ch. 8). This argument follows from the author’s view of cultural history as forged in the fires of complex class relationships, a position much travestied and misused in the past but which allows him to invoke a much broader and more dynamic framework of cultural analysis than customary. It is a framework that permits more questions to be asked, a much greater range and diversity of possible evidence to be assembled, and the possibility of reconstructing a more complex concatenation of forces and relationships influencing the phenomena under investigation. Since even negative results – those conforming with ‘standard’ positions – would thereby be based upon this greater range of enquiry and empirical capture (and would thus bear their ‘mark’, so to speak), the principles behind a contextual and class-concerned strategy seem irresistible. In sum, these different facets of the investigation of the case study provide the basis required for the theoretical arguments about culture.16

Fox is at his best when describing the social and political aspects of these movements, but much less so when treating more contextual issues and when theorizing about their nature and implications. This is not because of an inability to handle issues at these levels, but due to a haste which

16 In mainstream Euro-American work on India, both past and present, the corporate ideology of caste has seemed to stand for social relations as such and thus to exclude the possibility of class (see Marriott and Inden 1974, and the discussion between Marriott and Barnett, Fruzetti and Ostor 1976 and 1977); thus, it is well worth pointing to the less obvious methodological virtues in applying the concept, as well as to the fact that other groups of specialists treat the same social objects according to different criteria: development economists, on the one hand, and the historians, on the other. The latter increasingly argue that caste forms but one component of the complex of social relationships forming India’s eminently comparable pre-colonial societal orders.
never allows him sufficient repose to plumb the real depths and difficulties of these questions - ones which, in the planned course of his analysis and in the light of a social science and historical literature in which contexts have been persistently and systematically neglected, are of vital importance to his project. For example, the fascinating narrative and descriptive detail - the 'historical ethnography' essential for subsequent interpretive and theoretical consideration - is far too peremptorily presented, often already over-interpreted by the time it hits the page and interlaced with a frustrating rhetoric which continuously interrupts his text (e.g., Ch. 5). Moreover, he is too little concerned with the manner in which this long and factious struggle itself shaped the ways in which his data was collected; for example, much evidence is cited from works by contemporary Indian, even Punjabi writers, in addition to more directly colonial sources of data collection. It can hardly be assumed that these contemporaries of yesterday's and today's Sikh struggles remained untouched by the forces, passions and perspectives affecting conflicts which were so pregnant with meaning and implication for their own future and that of the Indian state. Thus, some degree of detailed investigation, worked into the presentation of the evidence, ought to have been conducted into the questions of from whom and under what conditions data had been put together. After all, these same conditions have constituted precisely those active forces which, in Fox's account, generated further conflict as well as the types of image and identity of concern to the study. Sources - descriptive and statistical - are also culture, selected categories and priorities, forcing houses for certain conceptions of order and domination, and thus intrinsic to the concerns of the book.

These problems of too much haste, short cuts in the argument, a rhetoric which induces scepticism even among those likely to be most sympathetic, and often poor presentation of evidence, are endemic to the study. Thus, given our remarks concerning the characteristically compartmentalized character of 'non-western' studies, his attention to wider contexts, and thus to more widely based literatures than that merely concerned with India, is highly praiseworthy, and yet his choice is too selective, too unargued a basis of personal preference to be convincing. For example, it is excellent that he introduces dependencia theory for the tasks of interpreting Indian colonial theory. Dependencia is best known in the form given to it by Immanuel Wallerstein in his *The modern world-system* (1974), yet, as Roxborough points out, the term more accurately applies to a broad body of arguments and debates (Roxborough 1979, Ch. 4). It is also extremely controversial, and now, more than at any time previously, serious argu-

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17 The point should be a platitude among historians. Clive Dewey's analysis of Punjab's agricultural statistics (1974) is an extreme position, but it succeeds as a warning against using sources without sufficient attention to the social and political conditions of their production. See also two works, which Fox himself cites, in which the issue is at the forefront of their arguments: Gould 1981, and Haller 1971.
ments have been raised questioning its apparent simplifications (the conceptual and interpretational poverty of the grid it composes). At the least, it has been a powerful stimulus to the broadening of frameworks of interpretation in several disciplines, breaking open the hard core of national and local compartments into which structure and process in societal relationships have customarily been ordered (e.g., Roxborough 1979:69). It is important to make this point and give credit to Fox, even if today most original sympathizers see even the pasts of international capitalism as having been inescapably more complex than allowed by the grid of dependencia.

However, Fox's use of the development/underdevelopment concept seems assertive and confused. At first, he applies it as a description of the first phase of colonial rule, in which 'it was sufficient and necessary to commercialize and monetize agriculture - that is to force agrarian production and rural labor into the market... [the] “mercantilization of pre-capitalist relations” as Samir Amin sees it' (16). Given the flourishing literature on pre-colonial economy and international economic integration, his frequent use of terms such as 'pre-capitalist' and 'world-economy' to describe 19th-century Punjab and its broader contexts ought to be matters of controversy and demonstration, but instead they appear not as items of a superior theory among alternatives but as self-evident. Furthermore, the version of 'development of underdevelopment' given to us is an oft-applied formula which when explained turns out to be a substantial misunderstanding of its intended usages. On the one hand, the phrase itself is Gunder Frank's and he uses it not in order to describe an aspect or phase of the expansion of capitalism, but as an explanation for what he conceives to be the generic characteristics of international relationships in the modern period, and intended as a break with the very patterns of thinking on the basis of which labels such as 'pre-capitalist' and 'feudal' are so generously applied to third-world institutions and social relationships. However, Fox uses it to describe (to assert rather than to argue) a short transitional phase of early colonial policy which from the 1880s would be transformed into a policy of 'investments in agriculture [which] developed rural productivity in a way that the colonial development of underdevelopment never had' (53). The problem is not that he departs from the rigours of borrowed concepts and texts (which in itself would be creditable), but that he does so without notice or reasoning - that is, without noticing a shift in the level of abstraction and empirical focus in the way the theory is applied.

On the other hand, Fox tells us that the phrase was intended by its followers to mean that 'inequality within the world system resulted because core regions of the capitalist world-economy developed at the

18 The primary point of the essays in Gunder Frank 1967, for example Ch. IV, 'Capitalism and the Myth of Feudalism in Brazilian agriculture'.
expense of development in peripheral regions' and that 'production in the periphery got distorted and remained backward, whereas the production of the core soared' (17) (the prose style is characteristic). However, this is not so: the theory is meant to explain not the maintenance of backwardness but its very creation - the development of structural backwardness from what had previously been substantially more differentiated and more development-oriented origins. In fact, Fox has simply moulded the theory to the very kind of simple unilinear, progressivist evolutionism which, as we noted above, he himself enunciates (colonial occupation introducing the world market, monetization, 'mercantilization' and commercialization) and against which dependency theory had been developed in order to reassess the nature of the obstacles besetting third-world development in the 1960s.

Finally, after repeating the formula 'development of underdevelopment' time and again as if a fact of history (pp. 17-20), we are suddenly introduced to its inadequacy as a concept and to the existence of a critical literature (24-26); that is, it suffers the alchemy of a transformation from positive fact into a disputable theory which has failed to do justice to the diversity of social and political forces in the modern world. But even here the text remains assertive and peremptory - statements of views rather than the closely reasoned arguments which are required to establish or dispense with the various theories involved.

3. Culture

The same problems affect the author's theoretical treatment of culture itself. I remarked that Indianist studies have seemed to many of us to have remained the most recalcitrant and unqualified retreat of the old culturalist determinism, with the consequence that one enters his text with considerable excitement and sympathy. No really acceptable materialist alternative to culturalist determinism has been developed to date, and, indeed, it seems true to say that would-be materialists are themselves dominated by culturalist perceptions despite the manifest criticisms they trenchantly level.

19 Concerning unilinear evolutionism, see n. 5 above.
20 For example, in remarking that 'These critics recognize that third-world countries did not become fully capitalist under colonial regimes and even now are not' (24), Fox does not discuss the content of either this criticism or their own interpretations (they debate rather than 'recognize'), side-stepping the complexity and controversy surrounding these issues. In this respect, even his attachment to Jairus Banaji (spelled Banerji in both text and index) and Hamza Alavi is too unspecific to record their important differences concerning nineteenth-century colonial India (and, not least, uses of the word 'pre-capitalist') (180).
21 Except for brief comments in n. 1, I have purposely not reproduced my own hypotheses concerning the question of 'culture' and its relationship to 'society'. To have done so would have shifted the focus of this review away from Fox and have involved writing a much more extensive text. However, I am currently involved in an extensive comparative study of the question (provisionally entitled The explanation of difference), initially represented in Perlin 1985 and 1987. I say this in order to insist that my criticism of Fox is not merely negative.
What is Culture?

against them. Fox belongs to a venerable tradition in his wish to combine materialism and culturalism in a new theoretical synthesis. We noted that in the broader domain of the social sciences, the last twenty-five years have witnessed a growing reaction, both from within and from outside the conventional disciplines against the old terms and polarities of culturalist and materialist debate, but that unfortunately even here, most, perhaps all of these attempts to reconsider the nature of culture and society have failed to break with established traditions: most disputants, the Marxists as much as the others, have wearily continued to tread the same (essentially culturalist) epistemological circle without producing the kind of break which all seek. Nevertheless, the body of accumulating criticism described above is not a question of a few isolated individuals standing alone above a morass of conventionalized thinking; there is a wide and illuminating critical literature covering several disciplines and to which many individuals have separately contributed. However, Fox’s choice of literature and argument against which to argue is highly restricted. Curiously enough, he is in part explicitly trying to do battle with his own American anthropologist colleagues, and this part of his argument has a curiously parochial character (even given the inclusion of Fredrik Barth and F.G. Bailey in the discussion) (Ch. 10 and pp. 203-204); but in part he is also concerned to present his own hypotheses through critical dialogue with a small, select band of what for him are clearly the major theorists of the problem: Pierre Bourdieu, E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Marshal Sahlins, Clifford Geertz and Alain Touraine (Ch. 11). Any sense of a larger population of ideas, of collective theatres of disputation, of arguments that transcend the confines of anthropology (he does not make enough of the intellectual backgrounds of Thompson and Williams), is entirely lacking. As with his presentation of economic history, the difficulty is that even when one is sympathetic with the project – even with some of the detail of his opinions – his style and approach are counterproductive; that is, they are so assertive (rather than reasoned), so laced with polemical rhetoric, and so reductive when representing the views of others on the issues at stake, compared with the terms of debate in the wider literature, as to render his case unconvincing.

His selection of ‘masters’ to discuss (irony intended, for it evinces a certain view of creative life – of the agency of culture, no less – which is as arrogant as it is preponderant and false) appears to involve a marked ignorance of the wide range of other, often significant contributions to the question, and worse, a debilitating unawareness of the state of debate as it exists today – that is, of the contexts of collective disputation of which his ‘masters’ form highly dependent, controversial and incomplete parts. An instructive example consists of the comparative, European, historical

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22 An example of this sway of culturalism lies in the acceptance by Marxist historians and sociologists of India of the view of caste in India presented by the classical anthropologists (and Orientalists) See Perlin 1987:316-317 & n. 15 for discussion and references.
literature on popular mentalities and on past social movements, in which E.P. Thompson’s work has its proper and much disputed place (disputed as much from the left as from the right), and in which there has developed a significant confrontation between historians and anthropologists over precisely the nature of culture and thus about what should constitute an adequate approach towards its study (see, for example, Hildred Geertz and Keith Thomas 1975; as Thomas remarks, the real issues have yet to be faced in either discipline). Here, Fox’s anti-holistic perspective on culture would have found natural argumentative purchase, Geertz taking Thomas to task for not treating 16th-century culture as a coherent, systematic body of belief, while Thomas sets out the reasons why he regards such approaches as highly mistaken or inappropriate, culture being open and dynamic, located in countless contexts and agents. In a more recent example, Stuart Clark (1983) has written a much-discussed critique of the French historians of collective mentalities which possesses considerable general relevance. He attacks this school (for example, Robert Mandrou, Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Fernand Braudel, who had been much influenced by the work of Durkheim, Tylor and others on contemporary ‘non-Western cultures’) for their highly skewed approach to the culture of past times, treating it largely as a negative version of our own self-images of technological, rational ‘Western Culture’, thus as so many incomplete models of the universe, of peoples and classes possessing inadequate means to control environments, their ‘cultures’ expressing collective anxieties in a hostile world (see also Muchembled 1985:4).23 Clark is one of many historians strongly influenced by current anthropological concerns to analyse the specific and varied ‘systems of meaning’ composing other cultures, and he thus points to the notable absence, within the literature on popular mentalities, of serious attention to the content of popular cultural expression – to its own connected argumentation, its symbols, its rituals. Clark’s essay, however, is simply a contribution to more general controversies about popular culture among historians (that is, transcending his merely French subject matter), and the controversies themselves, both their silences and their positive contributions, as also the highly problematic question of the combination of history and anthropology (an ‘interface’ problem, if ever there was one), are highly pertinent.24

23 Analogous to the observation by Gould (1981) that the white North European and North American male stood as the measure against which other peoples and women were (mis)measured in 19th-century studies of race and intelligence, and to the equal mis-measure of Asia’s economic histories in terms of the question of why they did not spontaneously develop an industrial capitalism like ‘Europe’.

24 This frontier problem makes interdisciplinary exercises unexpectedly hazardous, since neither discipline consists of pure fact and acceptable theory. Thus, Felix Gilbert (1982) attacks Richard C. Trexler’s application of Geertz’s ‘theatre state’ from Bali to Renaissance Florence (Trexler 1981); however, a more fruitful inter-disciplinary criticism might be to use our excellent detailed knowledge of Florentine history to question the very validity of concepts such as the ‘theatre state’.
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Clark is correct in viewing this concern for cultural content as a particular virtue of recent anthropological work, even though the latter has been much less satisfactory in defining what should constitute the cultural object and what form it should be seen to take. The focus on culture 'from the inside' and the lack of satisfactory definition of what it constitutes, has helped to stimulate the instructive ambiguities and enigmas of the relativism/rationalism debate (unmentioned by Fox) in which, once more, specificity and holism seem to preclude the possibilities of comparison. The result is that even for many self-labelled rationalists (take Charles Taylor and Ernest Gellner, for example) means for comparison only arise with the historical emergence of our own 'rational' and universalizing culture – the relativist ground thereby surviving right in the heart of the rationalist position in so far as 'cultures' of the past and of the 'other' are concerned.

In short, Fox may reasonably find the 'cultural meaning' school itself problematic, but the difficulty is that we wouldn't know it since the issue is undiscussed. Moreover, his apparent ignorance of the terms of this debate is shown by his manner of presenting, on the one hand, the ritual and beliefs of Sikhism and, on the other, those theories which he chooses to oppose. Of the first, despite his constant use of the word 'meanings' throughout the text, his actual treatment of the empirical aspects of the Sikh movement also lacks analysis of its cultural content (he presents 'facts', but fails to considers their implications). For example, he provides fascinating information about the make-up of the rural bands and the recruitment procedures accompanying the Third Sikh War of the 1920s (Ch. 5). But through indiscriminately denying an important function to past cultural ideas in the formation of the culture of the present (again a case of rhetorical preference rather than of reasoned argument) (e.g., p. 122), he fails to provide an adequately balanced analysis of his view that the Sikh stereotype was largely influenced from outside – namely by what he presents as an all-pervasive and ubiquitous British government (this seems to be Thompson's disputable concept of 'cultural hegemony' taken to its extreme). This is a general difficulty reflected in his treatment of other theories (that is, in his treatment of the 'meanings' of his colleagues): for example, 'moral economy' is not treated as possessing a content of distinct ideas about the content of culture, but instead as a simplistic argument that the cultural past continues in and determines the present...

25 Also to be seen in the debates over dependency theory.
27 Thompson 1978; it is one thing to argue that 'a single religious community, in the sense of a shared set of traditions, cultural meanings, and social practices, was absent among those who called themselves Sikhs in late nineteenth-century Punjab' (108), but quite another to ignore the accumulating cultural production and experience of the populations concerned.
which parody he then denies (pp. 107-108, 122). The result of his disagree-
ment with his own misrepresentation is that Sikh culture is never entered,
so that, correspondingly, he never seriously engages with the dynamic of
‘culture in the making’ – his excellent subtitle and the valid subject of his
theorizing.

A case in point consists in the name given to the rural associations
mentioned above (one of many possible instances): jathe (p. 98). These
bands articulated an egalitarian, fraternal ethic of which the term jathe
(family) might be seen to function as a significant and characteristic social
metaphor. Indeed, in a different part of India, Maharashtra, the word jathe
is simply one element of a most elaborate and precise vocabulary used to
express the ‘meanings’ of a 17th/18th-century, broad-based, but diffe-
rently institutionalized, fraternalist counter-ideology (counter, that is to
other, particularly dominant ideological tendencies in the same societal
matrix).28 Elsewhere in India, but also in Europe, analogous institutions
and vocabularies were surprisingly common – these might or might not
turn out to be comparable, according to the varying dispositions of the
scholar – but they clearly indicate problems of cultural ethnography which
Fox’s emphasis on colonial transplantation sidesteps. While Fox mentions
some Sikh rituals and conceptions, their content – that is, a rooted content
 capable of forming more complex compounds with colonial ideological
hand-outs and possessing a degree and kind of connectedness between
them (which is not to imply conceptual holism) – is not considered.

Instead, we hear that the various components of the Sikh and Hindu
movements of the time demonstrated ‘immature class consciousness’,
‘growing consciousness’, ‘limitations of a consciousness based on religious
identity’, ‘classes evolving toward consciousness’, or that ‘religious goals
were dysfunctional to lower middle-class interests’ (see esp. 25, 206-208).
Not only are we not told who are the judges of what is functional or
dysfunctional, but neither is there a discussion of what criteria should be
used to make such judgements (presumably, they are Marxist, but they are
very far from the different points of view constituting current Marxist
thinking). This crudely evolutionistic, quantitative, and old-fashioned ver-
sion of culture and consciousness – precisely the problem with which
Clark was dealing (a ‘culture without qualities’, so to speak) – suggests
judgemental perspectives redolent of those very class positions and that
colonial arrogance which it is surely our task to transcend in our own work
and subject to study.29

Better knowledge of the literature of debate would have provided Fox

28 The point concerns the content of an accumulated, if dynamic, set of connected cultural
usages, not, of course, reference to someone else’s inaccessible research.
29 Another influential re-interpreter of India’s cultural history, also concerned to generate
new frameworks of understanding and method, calls up equally dubious measures of
mental inadequacy in the peasants and artisans whom he studies (see Guha 1983: e.g., 19
& 27-28).
with the means to avoid such problems and indeed given him part of that apparatus necessary for writing the book which he set out to write: take the admirable collection of essays edited by Hollis and Lukes on rationalism and relativism (admirable even though one cannot agree with its limited frameworks and results); the fierce debates to be found among the historians of popular culture (inconclusive though they remain); the several volumes of research and theoretical articles of groups also concerned with new approaches to 'culture' in India; Dan Sperber's provocative views on the contingencies of belief and even on the word 'culture' meant as a consistent, coherent 'system' of meaning; and Keith Thomas's above-mentioned, important, sceptical commentary on the diversity and unboudedness of cultural expression within a complex society. The absence of reference to any of this work gives to Fox's presentation a curious irrelevance where issues of general interest are concerned.

The same kinds of criticism could be made of several other features of his argument. For example, he denies (and I certainly agree) that culture determines consciousness or that it is a given and coherent body of meaning; yet, his actual presentation of nineteenth-century British views of society and race implies that they determined colonial policy and behaviour and that they comprised a remarkably uniform, uncontested and cohesive 'system' of ideas. Again, his discussion of the manner in which these views of race were transferred willy-nilly to the self-consciousness of the colonial subject also seems remarkably determinist and would have been better informed (and even supported) by knowledge of the comparative literature which has grown up around the concept of the 'invention of tradition', especially the rich body of discussion which has centred on Africa, and recent contributions by Indianists pointing to comparable processes affecting the Indian caste structure during the colonial period (e.g., Washbrook, 1981 & 1982).

Yet, better respect for the collective and inter-disciplinary character of debate would still not have been enough to produce the book which Fox set out to write. He would also need to have engaged both himself and the reader in a process of detailed reflection - that is, in wholehearted reasoning and argument in place of opinionation, assertion and polemic. Then, with his thoroughly praiseworthy and courageous plan of action, his timely dyspepsia over the conventions of the media, there might have been born a powerful and pioneering book which would have stimulated broad-based discussion. More particularly, such a book - the book that Fox might have written - is badly needed to shake up the cosy conventions of the various Indianist fields and, more generally, to lever us out of the culturalist

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30 Ranajit Guha, mentioned in the previous note, has been associated with a collection of younger scholars who have published many studies and theoretical discussions concerning culture (thus the series called Subaltern studies, published by Oxford University Press); their claim to represent new approaches and positions merits discussion, in spite of my remarks about Guha himself.
treadmill. As it is, the ‘baby’ of his admirable project will be all too easily rejected together with the ‘bathwater’ of its unfortunate execution. But, if sorrow for the product, all praise to Fox for his original conception.

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